

HISTORISCHE AUFNAHMEN

SHOSTAKOVICH: Piano Concerto No. 1, in C, Op. 35; Piano Concerto No. 2, in F, Op. 101; 3 Fantastic Dances, Op. 1. Dmitri Shostakovich, pianist; Ludovic Vaillant, trumpeter (in Concerto No. 1); French National Radio Orchestra conducted by André Cluytens. World Records SH 293.

Shostakovich, who played Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata at his official debut, was a brilliant pianist as well as a major composer. While only one minor sample of his playing music by another composer survives (his part in the Bach Triple Concerto in D Minor, a German radio tape once issued in the U.S. on Regent RGT 5020), he did record a substantial amount of his own music. These recordings are, in my opinion, an important addition to the legacy of composer recordings, and I wish they could all be kept in circulation. Unfortunately, a relatively recent Soviet collection of Shostakovich's recordings (Melodiya M 10-39073/80), including an unpublished broadcast performance and some Czech 78s, was never exported here, while a similar but not identical collection published by HMV (RLS 721) has already been deleted.

These performances were recorded in 1958. I believe they were Shostakovich's last recordings, although I do not have exact dates for all of his records. I presume that both ill health and increasing concentration on composition led Shostakovich to withdraw from public performance after that year. Certainly these performances show a fine pianist at the height of his powers. None of these pieces represent the composer at his most profound, but the sustained brilliance of the playing is an excellent reflection of the music's content, resulting in a singularly entertaining as well as illuminating record.

The collaboration of Cluytens and the orchestra is extremely alert. Vaillant fully deserves his solo credit; his very accomplished playing is appropriately brash but never ugly. Soviet-made alternate performances of both concertos are in existence (No. 1, a broadcast, conducted by Samuel Samosud; No. 2, conducted by Alexander Gauk), but these French recordings are superior in every technical and artistic respect.

For the American market, this English release is redundant. The same performances have been available for several years as Seraphim 60161. While the World Records pressing has marginally fuller sound quality, my old Seraphim copy is quite acceptable. However, the more widely these recordings circulate, the better. I only wish some American company would restore (or, in some cases, issue in the U.S. for the first time) some of Shostakovich's other performances, as well as those of such favored interpreters of his work as the Beethoven String Quartet and conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky. Perhaps Shostakovich is not yet "historical" enough for such treatment, but the time will certainly come.

MOZART: Clarinet Quintet in A, K. 581. Charles Draper, clarinetist; Lener String Quartet. Oboe Quartet in F, K. 370. Leon Goossens, oboist; Lener String Quartet members (Lener, Roth, Hartman). World Records (England) SH 318.

This odd revival is about 1/3 almost great and 2/3 rather dreadful. Much is made in Pamela Weston's notes of Charles Draper's greatness as a clarinetist, which may well be true. His playing is technically flawless, his tonal production impressively even. He also plays with all the musical comprehension of a chimpanzee. Phrases are straight, uninflected, inexpressive. In conjunction with the rather cloying playing of the Lener Quartet, Draper produces what is probably the least enjoyable performance of the great Mozart piece I have heard. The most blatant example of musical misunderstanding is probably heard in the trio of the Minuet, where the players' stiffness produces the effect of a mechanical circus instrument--certainly not what Mozart intended. But nowhere can I call this performance good.

Goossens, on the other hand, is both a great instrumentalist and a great interpreter. Even in recordings made as recently as 1977 he is beautiful to hear. In 1933, when this version of the Mozart Quartet was recorded, he was certainly in his prime, and the superb control of the instrument is allied to a most affecting expressive quality. I would not say that Goossens inspires the Lener Quartet to play any better than they do in the Clarinet Quintet, and some of Jenö Lener's phrases are annoyingly saccharine, but somehow it doesn't matter as much as in the Quintet, perhaps because the music is so much lighter.

The Clarinet Quintet, which was recorded in 1928, appears on LP for the first time. The transfer, credited to Keith Hardwick, is quite acceptable, although the amount of surface noise made me wonder if it was made from pressings rather than masters. The Oboe Quartet has appeared on microgroove before, as HMV 7" 45rpm 7 ER 5232. Since the transfer engineer for the new edition is listed as "Unknown," I presume the same tape was used. It is more vivid in sound, and has less surface noise, than the transfer of the Quintet, but perhaps we can thank the age of the recording and the existence of masters for at least some of the difference.

I would happily buy this LP for Goossens's playing, such artistry being rare at any price. However, I would have been very much happier with an all-Goossens LP, especially since so many of his 78s have never been reissued on LP. Perhaps World Records placed the last movement of the Quintet on side 2 to avoid the embarrassment of an LP side running less than a quarter of an hour, but since the Quintet runs just under 28 minutes I would have preferred to have it on one side--that is, if I ever intended to play it again.

RAVEL: Piano Concerto in G; DEBUSSY: La plus que lente; 2 Arabesques; Estampes--No. 3, Jardins sous la pluie; MILHAUD: Piano Concerto No. 1;

Saudades do Brazil--Paysandu; Automne--Alfama. Marguerite Long, pianist; orchestras conducted by Maurice Ravel and Darius Milhaud (in their concertos). EMI Pathé Marconi Références C 051-16349.
PROKOFIEV: Piano Concerto No. 3. Serge Prokofiev, pianist; London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Piero Coppola. RAVEL: Piano Concerto in G. Marguerite Long, pianist; orchestra conducted by Maurice Ravel. World Records SH 209.

The new French EMI recording listed above is a straight reissue of French Columbia COLC 319, itself a transfer from 78s made between 1929 and 1935. Many of the French transfers in this Les Gravures Illustres series (some of which were issued in England and the U.S. as "Great Recordings of the Century") were less than adequate dubbings, particularly in the matter of upper frequencies, which were often drastically filtered to remove surface noise. However, COLC 319, one of the later records in the series, was actually a quite adequate dub, with highs as sparkling as the originals allowed. Thus there is very little difference in sound quality between the French EMI and English World Records transfers of the Ravel Concerto, even though the English edition was remastered by Anthony Griffith.

The Prokofiev Concerto is an altogether different matter. This recording was also included in the GROC series (as Angel COLH 34), coupled with some of Prokofiev's solo piano pieces played by the composer. The 78s of the Concerto had outstanding sound for their day (1932), but it was emasculated in the old French transfer, which is now unfortunately perpetuated in a German EMI Dacapo edition. Here, Griffith's transfer, by comparison, removes a wall between us and the performance, restoring the dynamic range and tonal quality of the originals.

I am saying little about these performances since I presume they will be well known by now to most readers. Briefly, in my opinion, the Prokofiev Concerto recording is one of the outstanding documents we have of a composer as performer, at least as far as the piano playing is concerned. Coppola doesn't seem to understand the concerto at all and there are some near disasters in the orchestra, but Prokofiev's playing is extremely brilliant without being ugly or percussive, and he plays some passages with a melting lyrical quality which shows the wide range of expression he cultivated and wanted in his music. Long's playing is also quite superb, and although I don't care much for Milhaud's Concerto, everything else on her LP is very much worth hearing. Ravel's direction of his concerto, despite a few shaky moments, is very persuasive and, again, instructive of the composer's wishes.

I'm afraid I can't offer much help as to which of these records to buy. I own both the Long and Prokofiev collections for their contents, and I'm keeping the World Records coupling just for the excellent sound of the Prokofiev Concerto.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 9, in d, Op. 125. Isobel Baillie, soprano; Kathleen Ferrier, alto; Heddle Nash, tenor; William Parsons, bass;

London Symphony Orchestra and uncredited chorus conducted by Bruno Walter. Educational Media Associates BWS-742.

This performance was given at the Royal Albert Hall on November 13, 1947. I am curious about the origin of the transcription, since so little material has survived from British broadcasts before the mid-1950s. This one has such excellent sound that it is obviously not taken off the air, and the particular quality of surface noise (of which there is not very much, although the amount varies) indicates clearly that the transcriptions were made at 33 1/3 rpm. There is some distortion in loud passages, but not much; in general, the recording is outstanding for its age. However, there are two problems worth noting. The fizzy surface noise heard intermittently in the first movement, while not very heavy, is rather annoying. Heavier crunch, in the last movement, bothers me less. More seriously, a large portion of the last movement comes from a disc which was severely off-center, and the resulting pitch fluctuation is enough to make me seasick.

The performance itself is not at all what I would have expected from Walter, since I make the common error of thinking of him as a "gentle" conductor despite some evidence to the contrary. This performance is incisive, sometimes quite savage in its intensity. The first movement in particular has a quality of nervous energy which I find disturbing. Instrumental solos pop out as though spotlighted in a multi-channel recording (which they obviously couldn't have been). The tympanist gets rather out of control near the end of the movement. I like to hear the tympani, even in the foreground, but this fellow blots out the entire orchestra when he gets going and sounds as though he's trying to fight off the German army through decibel power alone. The Scherzo is similarly tense (and drum-heavy), and even the Adagio, while sensitively played, lacks repose.

One imagines that most customers who pick up this record will do so for the finale, and especially for the chance to hear Ferrier sing a few notes they haven't heard her do before. In truth, the solo singers don't have much to do here, but what they do have is usually difficult and all come across very impressively. Parsons, whose name is new to me, manages his part resonantly enough although his German sounds a little odd, and the others, better known quantities, do about what one would expect of them. The uncredited chorus certainly deserves a mention, since they sing very well and provide what struck me as the most positive element in the entire performance.

Well, there you have it: quite an unusual release which will intrigue many listeners, but certainly nobody's basic Beethoven Ninth, or even their basic Bruno Walter Beethoven Ninth.

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